

# Heavenly Places

A NOVEL



Kimberly Cash Tate



West Bloomfield, Michigan

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Heavenly Places

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# Chapter One



I told Hezekiah wanted to live in Potomac or Chevy Chase or North Bethesda, someplace with cachet, where people had money and minded their own business. I didn't know this for a fact, of course—that they minded their own business—but it sounded good and gave me one more reason to tick off in favor of living there. If I had had my druthers, I wouldn't have lived anywhere near the D.C. metropolitan area. But if we had to be there, the where *had* to be Montgomery County, Maryland.

Montgomery County had seasoned money and grand old homes—or, in Potomac, breathtakingly newer homes. Exquisite shopping. And neighbors who would be concerned mostly with themselves and, perhaps, the fleeting question of how another black family amassed enough nickels to break bread among them. They wouldn't get to know me, I wouldn't get to know them. And we would revel, the neighbors and I, in perpetual aloofness.

I definitely did *not* want to live in Prince George's County—no matter how many new communities somebody built and called “exclusive.” No matter how many black executives made it their home, as the realtor was fond of sharing. P.G. with bells on was still P.G. Step outside the luxury home, tip past the golf course, and the love affair ends. No cosmopolitan breeze for miles. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do. And worse—black folk everywhere who've worked hard and long enough to buy a few thousand square feet, who are happy to be around other black folk with a few thousand square feet, and who—I could just see it—would think

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it a wonderful thing to knock on the doors of said black folk and get to know them. I wanted no part of it and told Hezekiah so.

Well, I told him everything except the part about the neighbors because he would have scoffed. Hezekiah is a people person. In our former neighborhood outside Chicago, he knew everyone on our block, and many who resided two and three blocks over. He took walks, not as a form of exercise—he keeps his six-foot-two body fit with regular basketball runs and weight lifting—but to catch up with whomever was out and about. If he'd had his way, we would have had rolling dinner invitations starting up our side of the street and going down the other. I know because he suggested it once. He must have known it was a long shot because when I suggested he might be crazy, he left it alone.

It's not that I don't like to get to know people. Well. I won't sugarcoat. I'm not a fan of people. For the first half of my life, I cared about them too much—what they thought of me, why they thought what they thought of me. I cared about the words they said to me and would sometimes count them after an encounter to see if I could use up ten fingers. Often I needed only two. Usually it was, “Hi, Treva.” On a good day, five. “Hi, Treva, how are you?”

These rude people would treat me like that when they were in my home, or I was in theirs. They were peers and parents of peers, longstanding members of my parents' social circle. We saw each other regularly at this function or that. I ached for real interaction and inclusion. From time to time I'd rehearse in my head how I might turn those five words into a conversation; it seldom worked in reality. If I said, “Fine, how are you?” I got a “Fine” over the shoulder. If I planted myself where conversation was flowing, it was worse. The laughter and banter would swirl all around me while my own interjections fell flat.

Sometimes I wonder if time has exaggerated it all in my mind. Was it really that bad? But then I remember the utter sadness that would overtake me afterward, how I would cry someplace alone because once again I'd felt the sting of a brush-off. I cried, too, because of the reason. It wasn't that they didn't like

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me, in the sense of judging some aspect of my personality. They simply gravitated to their own, and I wasn't one of them. They were various shades of fair with naturally straight hair and eyes the color of pools. I was milk chocolate with hair that grew—I was thankful—but needed help to get straight, and I had regular old dark brown eyes, too far on the other end of the spectrum to be one of them.

So by force of circumstance and other more painful circumstances in my own family, I gravitated as well, further and further inside myself. I could never shake the burden of caring what people thought of me, but by college the hunger for interaction had turned cold. I didn't look for friends; my focus was grades. In law school and then in the working world, the essence of that focus never changed. I was driven to succeed—yes, to prove myself. I had a vision of what I wanted to do and who I wanted to be and where I wanted to be. It had to be a posh community, an established posh community. Every major city had one. And any major city would have been fine, except the one I was from—the District of Columbia. I never intended to return, not to the city itself nor anywhere in the Maryland-Virginia vicinity.

Since Hezekiah knew I wanted nothing to do with my former home, and since we found ourselves relocating there nonetheless, I figured he could at least let me choose the county. He didn't, which meant a debate ensued—a good one, between my P.G. County-born-and-bred husband and me.

It was largely one-sided. Hezekiah refuted each of my points with only one—the cost. “We can get more for our money in Prince George's County,” he insisted. I had my rebuttal at the ready. “We can get more for our money in Chevy Chase too,” I said. “Instead of square footage, the ‘more’ is prestige. It matters where you live. A premier address speaks volumes.”

“Really,” Hezekiah indulged, pulling his chair closer, hand lovingly upon my knee. “And what does it say?”

“Success. Significance. That we've risen to a higher level.”

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“I don’t need a house to tell me that. God already did.” Smiling, eyes penetrating.

“Hezekiah, the ‘speaking’ is not to you, it’s to others.”

“Oh, why didn’t you say so?” His half-chuckle was ominous. “We could’ve dispensed with this issue long before. The P.G. house—the one we can build from the ground up, the one that would be more spacious than any on your list—wins hands down because it’s smarter. It speaks to *me*. At one hundred thousand dollars less, it’s calling my name.”

That was it. Here I am. Unpacking. In Prince George’s County. And I’m about to scream because I haven’t been here but a few hours, movers still carting in boxes and beds, and some woman, a neighbor no doubt, has already stepped into my foyer.

“Hello?”

There she goes again. I am in the kitchen, rhythm broken, arm in the air, hoping the sudden silence sends this message: *Get the hint and leave*. I am not in the mood since I haven’t even come to grips with being here. I certainly don’t want to be bothered with a stranger who has the nerve to just walk up in my house. Granted, the door is open, but she’s a trespasser nonetheless.

“Hi, is anybody home?” the persistent voice sings out.

“Take a guess,” I sing back under my breath.

I resume work, pulling tightly packed swirl-accented glassware out of a box, unwrapping them, and lining them along the countertop to await a turn in the dishwasher. Quietly. I’m trying not to crumple the packing paper too much, resenting the fact that I can’t. Why would the woman drop by at such an inopportune time anyway? She couldn’t even wait for the moving truck to pull away.

A glass slides too quickly from my hand, making an awful ping as it catches the counter. I cringe, casting a furtive glance in the direction of the front door. I know she heard it. The kitchen sits a good distance from the entryway, tucked at the end of a slightly curved hallway, but that curve apparently does nothing to deflect sound.

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Her “Hello” was clear as a bell; my blunder had to be as well. *I bet she’ll follow that ping and find me here. I bet she’s like that.*

My eyes begin bouncing around the kitchen, hating the impression this will make if she sees it. It’s a mess—boxes and contents of boxes everywhere. I know that she knows that we are in the process of moving in, but what does that matter to my central nervous system? The thought of receiving a visitor in here right now is enough to make me hyperventilate. I need things in place, special dishware and collectibles perched behind lighted glass-front cabinets. I need countertops cleared of everything but the items strategically placed there, for neatness’ sake and for the sake of the tiny flecks of gold in the granite, just waiting to pop out and align themselves proudly with the burnt gold on the walls. It would be nice if one earthen-colored square of floor tile were visible, real nice if one could see the decorative tile pattern around the base of the center island. Definitely need a seasonal floral arrangement on the kitchen table, not that unsightly heap of mechanics’ tools that haven’t made their way yet into the garage.

And me. *I’m* a mess. Makeup’s faded, I’m sure. Nails chipped. Hair has no life, just hanging limp past my shoulders. And I’m wearing a sweatsuit, which I would wear only around the house, and that rarely, when I need to roll up my sleeves and work, like today, not in front of anyone outside of my family, and certainly not in front of someone I am just meeting. When people do happen into my world, I have to be prepared so everything can be just right. Whatever I can make beautiful—my house, my hair, my clothes—I’ll strive every time to do it. Helps me to feel good about myself, and even then it’s hard.

I tilt my ear sideways. Haven’t heard her in a couple of minutes. Maybe she won’t walk back here after all. Maybe she’s gone. A sigh escapes as I relish the thought.

“Hi, my name is Hope. My mommy’s in the kitchen.”

I groan at my five-year-old’s annoying bent toward hospitality.

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“Hello, Hope, I’m Carmen Nelson. This is my daughter, Stacy, and the baby’s name is Malcolm.”

What? Did she bring the whole family? My eyes flash to the ceiling and ricochet down. All I can do is beat a path to the foyer before Hope escorts her back here. The foyer is a much better option. Not much clutter there, so I won’t feel mortified the entire time we’re talking, and there’s nowhere to sit, which should keep it short. I can’t do anything about me, though.

Swiping a hand through my hair, I move my rubber soles quickly down the hall along the bamboo hardwood and into the domed entryway. I see her, illumined by a single ray of sun cast through the upper Palladian window. It complements her honey-nut complexion, which is the first thing I notice—where someone sits on the spectrum. She’s not on my end.

I muscle a smile and extend my hand. “Hi, I’m Treva Langston.”

Carmen tightens a one-arm grip around the baby and shakes my hand with the other. She’s wearing blue capri pants, a blue-and-white striped shirt, and Keds over bare feet. Her hair, pulled softly into a ponytail angled behind the ear, matches the color of her skin. I can’t tell if the hair color or the texture is natural. Eyes average brown. About five-five and in good shape, given the baby in her arms. She looks youthful and energetic. Peppy.

“Hi, Treva. My name is Carmen,” she says, and introduces her two children, both browner than she, the baby a much darker brown. He must take after the father.

Hope tugs at my arm, her rounded face animated with delight. She whispers, “Mommy, Stacy’s my age. She’s five.”

I give Stacy a smile and notice that she and Hope are about the same medium brown—another habit, comparing shades—all while quickly smoothing Hope’s flyaway hairs. She has several long braids, and none of them have been redone in days. I don’t know when or why she threw on these mismatched clothes—red shorts and a pink shirt with blue flowers—but I sure wish the boxes

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to her room had not yet been delivered. The girl loves to go digging in her clothes and pull out who knows what. And look at Stacy, wearing a cute pink sundress with cute pink sandals and a cute pink ribbon in her freshly combed hair. I glance up the spiral staircase, hoping my other two daughters remain hidden. They're older than Hope, and more particular about their appearance, but I don't want to take a chance. The two of us look bad enough.

"I hope we're not disturbing you too much," Carmen says. "We saw a moving truck down the block and thought we'd walk down and welcome you. Your husband is so nice. He talked with us outside and told us to go on in and call for you."

"Oh, really?" *Why am I not surprised?*

And now that I know she's seen Hezekiah, I'm even more self-conscious. I'm self-conscious whenever someone meets him first. Hezekiah's skin is so light that I know people expect his wife to be, well, not so dark. I've seen the subtle double takes when I walk up to him at a gathering and he introduces me. Now, it *could* be my imagination. Hezekiah says my upbringing has caused me to read color into too many situations. But I might be right too. They might actually be thinking, *How did those two get together?* Or even, *He could have done better.* I wonder if Carmen did some shade-comparing of her own.

She smiles. "This is a great neighborhood, isn't it?"

I give a slight nod to avoid stammering.

"I love the green space and the mature trees," Carmen is saying. "It's so serene. You'll find it has an old-fashioned feel because the developer kept the lots to a minimum. People actually talk to each other, you know?" The baby whimpers, she switches him to another hip, fishes a Winnie-the-Pooh pacifier from a small shoulder bag, sticks it into his mouth, and continues on. "Last week a neighbor stopped by to say hi and brought homemade cookies because she hadn't seen me around in a while. Wasn't that sweet? She wanted to know if I was all right. Lots of good people around here. I really like it; reminds me of my



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hometown in North Carolina.”

Hope and Stacy hopscotch across imaginary squares, a needed distraction as I reach for something beyond a visceral response. This might be Hezekiah’s cup of tea but it sure isn’t mine. Folk dropping by at will. Random acts of kindness, accompanied no doubt by expectation of reciprocity. Thrilling. What’s the use of a gated community if the irritants live within? I’d prefer privacy to cookies.

Seems I don’t need a response. She’s still talking.

“The woman a few houses down from you is from North Carolina too, Winston-Salem. Real nice, you’ll like her a lot. Where did you move from, Treva?”

“From the Chicago area.”

“Oh, where in Chicago? I’m a little familiar with it.”

I watch Carmen step further inside the entryway, afraid she’ll plop the baby down any second and make herself at home. “In Evanston, North Shore.”

“Chicago is such a beautiful city—the skyline, the lake. D.C. doesn’t have a downtown like that but we love it. You’ll see there’s a lot to do.”

“Actually, I grew up in D.C. but we’ve been away for a number of years.”

“Really? Well, I would love for us to get together, maybe during the day when the kids start school. I live on this same street but down and around the bend at 8217.”

Why does this woman think I don’t have anything better to do than to sit around and chitchat? And why is she assuming I don’t work?

The smile twitches but holds as I cross the entryway and stand before the opened double doors. “Thanks, Carmen. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you.” Carmen heads to the stroller parked in the circular drive and Stacy trails, giggling with Hope about something I missed. I urge Hope to join Hezekiah in whatever he’s doing and I pick up where I left off in the kitchen.

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I am working with greater intensity. Funny how a bad attitude helps you sail through a monotonous task. My thoughts are moving in tandem, fast and furious, assuring me that I really am unhappy in this fabulous new home. But I know it's not the home that's truly bothering me.

In truth (and I would never admit this to Hezekiah), buying a home in Prince George's County turned out to be the best part of this deal. The building process kept me intensely occupied, which meant less time to stew over the relocation itself. Hezekiah knew that I enjoyed decorating and would throw myself into the building of a home. He also knew that such immersion would be to his benefit, so he stepped completely out of the way and let me have at it.

I loved every minute. I loved making tough choices about layout and fun choices between hardwoods, granites, and stone. I loved picking appliances, searching like crazy for the right indoor and outdoor lighting, and even for the little knobs and pulls on the cabinet doors and drawers. I began to think maybe Hezekiah's prayers were being answered, that I was feeling more at peace with the move.

I say "Hezekiah's prayers" because the only prayer I was praying was to remain in Chicago. Even while my nose was buried in the building project, I made enough snippy comments to let Hezekiah know that I was proceeding under general protest and would have no problem chucking the whole thing and staying put. In the low moments, though, the builder would send digital pictures of the progress and I would grow excited about seeing the finished work.

One month ago we flew in for a walk-through of the completed home and were awestruck by what the builder had done. On that same visit, I met with an interior designer to implement the vision I have for the rooms and various spaces around the home. As instructed, I've already compiled notes and pictures of ideas in a nice little three-ring binder for our appointment in a couple of weeks. I've been greatly looking forward to that. I had the heated swimming pool filled a few days ago and lively colors applied to the builder's off-white walls. The Jacuzzi

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was made ready as well, and I was looking forward to snuggling in it with Hezekiah, maybe as early as tonight.

But whatever peace I had managed to find fled last night as I did a final walk around our empty Evanston home. All of the turmoil I had originally felt, the turmoil that had gurgled and bubbled for months, boiled over and handily engulfed me. Everything was wrong. Everything.

I couldn't believe I was actually leaving an associate position at Thompson & Klein in downtown Chicago. I could see the clouds from that office, the realization of my dreams. I could see future high-stakes litigation that would catapult me to higher echelons. I could see the federal bench from which I would one day rule. I could see the people before whom I would stand, graciously of course, with a fantastic, overwhelming, soul-satisfying smile of success that would say, "I told you so."

I was leaving all of that and heading...nowhere. No, not nowhere. Heading to unemployment, which is a definite somewhere, a *horrible* somewhere. I had thought surely by moving day that I would have secured a fantastic position at a D.C. firm. That assurance had to be what buoyed me throughout the building process. But that very last day in Chicago, another three-line form letter had arrived from a top firm telling me that they were not hiring. The enormity of it all struck me as I stood in the middle of the kitchen floor. I couldn't go without a desperate last stand.

"We can't leave," I said simply.

The car was loaded and Hezekiah had come to check on my whereabouts. Tired from cleaning the house and the garage, with a ten-hour drive in front of him, he simply looked at me, so I said it again. "We can't leave."

"Trev, we've gone over this a million times," he said. "Our house is sold. The truck is packed. The car is running. Let's go."

"Hezekiah, it's not too late. You know it isn't. Northwestern would take you back as a professor in a minute and my firm would do the same for me. We

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could find a house to rent until the Maryland house sells, and it should sell fairly easily since we got one of the last lots. What do you think of that house for sale over on Sheridan? It's old but we could update it like we did this one, and we could—"

"Treva," Hezekiah said calmly, "the girls are in the car. Take the time you need, then come on."

I barely said a word the entire ten hours. If I wasn't asleep, I was pretending to be asleep, the darkness a fitting serenade to my misery. By the time Hezekiah pulled into our new driveway, the sun had dawned bright and strong, but for me, it was still night.

I growl a sigh, unpack another plate, and sling it into the dishwasher, daring it to break. *God, what am I doing here? Why in the world did You let Hezekiah move us from Chicago? I was blossoming there, on track with my life. And if I had to come back, I could have at least returned triumphantly. Why have I been uprooted and stuck in barren soil? Nothing makes any—*

"Hey, Treva, guess who I found outside?" Hezekiah yells.

I jerk from my thoughts, gasp with knowing, and scurry to the foyer, feet flopping in tennis slides.

"Heyyyyyy!" My younger sister, Jillian, and I scream, hug, rock back and forth, look each other up and down, and scream again.

"Jilli, look at you; you look great!" And she does. I've known her all of her life and I'm still struck by her beauty. It doesn't matter what she wears—she's standing here in denim walking shorts, a rust colored T-shirt, and basic brown flip-flops, no makeup—she always shines.

Jillian was the sought-after one growing up, the one who blended in—her features a straight hand-me-down from our mother. The contrast never came between us; Jillian was my closest friend. But obviously, there *was* a contrast, and my mind, ever active, pointed it out on occasion. Like now, as I notice the slightly wet, wavy ringlets atop her head. That was one thing, well, one of the things, I couldn't help but envy—her wash-and-go hair.

"When did you cut your hair off, Jillian?"

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“Girl, two years ago. And look at yours. You’ve let it grow long. Turn around and let me look at you.”

I shrug and turn reluctantly. “Nothing to look at. I’m bummy today.”

“Please. You don’t know what ‘bummy’ is. Those are the cutest Capri jogging pants I’ve ever seen, and the fuschia Tee looks great with the fuschia piping on the pants. And I see you’re still working out. Got the tight everything going on. You’d better not say anything about my rear.”

Hezekiah clears his throat. “Before you two get too deep....”

“All right, Hezekiah.” Jillian laughs. “You know I haven’t seen my big sister in three years. She acted like the Midwest didn’t have planes to transport her back East.” She raises a hand to my coming objection. “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t even know my nieces anymore. Where are they anyway?”

“No telling. Hope, the Welcome Wagon, is usually the first one at the door when company comes. But she and Joy may be in our room. They got tired of dodging movers so Hez set up the DVD player in there. Faith was working on her room last I saw her, but that was a long time ago.”

“Well, give me a tour and we’ll find them on the way.”

We chatter our way into the living room and I listen to Jillian gush over the house I’d sell in a heartbeat.

“Treva, these wall-to-wall windows. Look at the sun you get in here. And what is that area over there?” Jillian’s face is pushed against the window panes of the French doors that open to the rear of the house.

“A loggia.”

“A what?”

“A covered porch, furnished like an indoor living space. At least it will be one day.”

“HGTV?”

“Magazine, girl.”

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“Hey, Jillian, thanks for coming,” Hezekiah calls out, leaning against a column just outside the living room, smiling as if there’s reason. Jillian turns, curiosity in her brow. “Why?”

“Because your sister was acting mean before you showed up, mad all over again about moving out here. Now look at her, all smiles. I won’t take it personally, though.”

Hezekiah’s tone is light, an attempt at peace, but he must not know where I’ve been. In a corner. The corner he put me in while, for hours, he unpacked and organized around the house and outside the house, anywhere I was absent, to give me space. Well, I’m not a child, obligated to come out of a time-out with a better attitude than the one I went in with. Mine is worse, and as far as I’m concerned, he just rang the bell. I’m coming out swinging.

Backing a few steps to his full view—lips scrunched, hand on a jutted hip—I wait for two movers harnessed with weight belts to pass. They’re laughing while carrying an antique armoire at a precarious tilt. I glare at them until they park it against the dining room wall unscathed, and turn that glare on Hezekiah.

“Excuse me? Won’t take *what* personally?” I say, my voice rising. “That life, as I knew it, is over? That you get to keep climbing your career ladder but mine is kicked to the ground? Oh, but for good measure I get to wile away my time, not in a community with art galleries, antique shops, ethnic restaurants, and upscale shopping within walking distance.” I fling my arms wide. “No, the best shopping these parts have ever seen is Beltway Plaza and Landover Mall, that great hustler hangout that somebody had the mercy to shut down. Why should you take any of this *personally*?”

My thoughts sound worse now that I’ve given voice to them. Regret is squeezing my lungs, begging me to stop. I’m feeling like a spoiled brat as I breathe in the scent of beautiful calla lilies sent this morning by the interior designer with a “Welcome” card, now perched in a crystal vase on a pedestal in the foyer—the foyer that is roomier than my college dorm room. Jillian’s mouth is hanging open

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as she wonders, I'm sure, what happened since last we spoke and she applauded my attitude adjustment over the move. She's praying for me right now, I just know it.

And Hezekiah, who had a fabulous offer from the University of Maryland and wouldn't accept the position until he knew I had one, which I did (until I didn't) and who likely would have moved to Montgomery County if I'd had a job but never said so to spare my feelings, is staring at me with a look I can't quite figure out. He is not smiling. I feel bad, but stubbornness has taken hold. I know I shouldn't—

"And let me add this," I say, finger stabbing the air, "if all you're going to say is, 'God's hand is in this move,' save it. I'm tired of hearing it. God has a plan for *my* life—isn't that what you like to say? So let me tell you God's plan for *my* life: God would have left me in Chicago."

With that, I corral my speechless sister with an arm hooked in hers, turn from Hezekiah, and continue the tour. "Let's go outside; I'll show you the loggia. The view from the—"

My breath catches as Hezekiah rushes me with a bear hug from behind, curling me forward with his two-hundred-pound muscular frame. His whisper teases up a sudden flutter: "If God's will is for *me* to be here, which I know it is, then God's will is for *you* to be here, because we're one, and there is no me without you. I don't know what will happen with your job situation, but I've been praying and I believe God will answer. I've also been praying about the *other* situation that's upsetting you but you won't talk about. Now, if you're still mad and need space, I understand. Let me just do this one thing."

I search his eyes but it's too late. His knuckles begin to tickle my side. I struggle to free myself, hiding a half-smile. In no time I'm slumping to my knees in uncontrolled laughter.

"Stop, Hez, let me go. Seriously." My body is writhing on the floor, a slave to two knuckles. "Jilli! Are you just going to stand there?"

"I'm cheering for Hezekiah. I always said he's the best thing that ever happened to you."

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“Hez, no, it hurts.” I would say anything to get out from under this.

He releases me and I scramble to my feet feigning a frown, fists squared in boxing mode.

“So you’re Ali now?” Hezekiah says. “Or Sugar Ray Leonard? You know he lived over near P.G. Community College when he was starting out.”

“Yeah, and moved to *Potomac* when he made it big.” Laughing, I jab the air as Hezekiah leans right, then left. The moment is surreal, Jillian’s words echoing in my heart: *He’s the best thing that ever happened to you*. Before Hezekiah, I never loosened up and acted silly. In fourteen years of marriage, he has brought things out of me that I didn’t know were there, things that I like—when I allow myself. I land a left hook to Hezekiah’s chest and he grabs me again.

“You know you can’t stay mad at me,” he cajoles, dotting my face with quick kisses, “and I know how I can help you through this. If you ever want to run for Miss P.G. County, I’ll swear you’re only twenty-one and single. I bet you’d win with your good-looking self.”

I catch one of those quick kisses on the lips and let it linger. He’s right about my not being able to stay mad with him. He’s a master at dealing with me, always knowing what I need—how long I need to stew, when I need to snap out of it, and how it needs to happen. In this moment, with his strong arms around me, the night has suddenly turned to day.

This time Jillian clears her throat and I dart back to her with fresh spunk. I *will* find a job. I *do* want this house. All the time I put into building it, I ought to.

“Thanks for coming, Jill. I mean it this time,” Hezekiah shouts, bounding upstairs.

“I’ll see you this evening,” Jillian shouts back.

“Oh, Jilli,” I moan, walking through the French doors, “I forgot we planned to get together tonight. Now that I’m up to my neck in boxes, I’d rather work until it’s cleared away.”

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“Girl, you can’t do it all in one night and you’ve got to eat. We live only ten minutes away—on the other side of the tracks.”

I give her a light shove. “Whatever, Jill.”

“Seriously, come on over.” Jillian admires the leaf of a shrub with great intensity. “And I think Mama’s coming too.”

A jolt surges through my body. I find that interesting, that my body reacts before my mind. It wants to sit down. The involuntary shaking is a clue. I look around as if furniture appeared while my back was turned, and then I remember that it exists only in my little three-ring binder. My body doesn’t mind; it settles for the wide tiles of the loggia. Legs pulled to the chest, arms wrapped around the legs, head tucked inside, it is hoarding relief as best it can, waiting for my mind to catch up, decide what we should do. The spunk that endured all of two minutes is gone. Thanks to Jillian, the Grand Dame has made her entrance, bringing with her, as usual, tangible distress.

She is *the* reason I never wanted to return—Patsy Parker Campbell, whom I haven’t spoken to in three years and whom, long before that, I had banished to the outermost ring of my life. I hadn’t even processed yet what it means to be near her again. I thought I could put off consideration of that reality for weeks, maybe months. I couldn’t have guessed I’d be dealing with it the first night.

I lift my head and ask accusingly, “She knows I’m back?”

“Is it a secret?”

“I sure hadn’t told her.”

“Well, I talk to her a little more than you do and it would have been unnatural for me to keep quiet about her daughter moving back to town.”

“You didn’t have to invite her to dinner. I have zero energy right now, and less for her. You know how she is.” I tuck my head back down.

Jillian touches my shoulder, eases down next to me on the tiled ground, and sighs. “I’m sorry. She called this morning and I honestly wasn’t thinking I had to be guarded, so when she asked what I was doing I told her I was cleaning the house, getting ready for you all to come over.

## Heavenly Places

She was quiet—you know Mama doesn't get quiet—and I felt bad and said, 'You're welcome to come, too, if you want.'

I groan loudly, understanding fully. The invitation didn't have to be, if only Jillian had had the guts to honor the status quo; lack of contact has worked quite well. But maybe Patsy didn't say she was coming. Jillian said, *I think Mama is coming*. Hopeful, I lift my head again. "And she said?"

"She said, 'Okay.'"

I stare at the pool, blankly at first, then with great interest. Its otherworldliness is inviting, and not just because it's a hot August day. I want to dive in, let the water swallow me whole. I want to feel the smack of a change in circumstance, the rush you feel when you don't dip toe-to-shin-to-waist-to-neck until you're completely under, but you just take the plunge. When I do that, I glide near the bottom and swim until I need a breath. I can't hear, can't see what's happening above, can't be bothered. My leg rocks side to side. It likes the idea, wants to give me a running start. The ripples conspire too, rolling lazily with the faint breeze in a come-hither fashion, promising to shut out the world. That's what I need, an escape.

Jillian knocks her leg against mine and playfully obstructs my view with her face. "Treva?"

"What."

"This *could* be a good thing. Maybe it's time for you to build a better relationship with Mama. Maybe you could begin to see her in a different light." Her earnest eyes fill my peripheral vision. "You're a new person, Treva. God has given you the strength, you know."

Jillian and Hezekiah, always quick with a pep rally.

"All things are new, Treva."

"With God in your life, all things are possible."

"Treva, God is living *in* you. You have everything you need."

## Kimberly Cash Tate

And on and on. I know she means well but not even Jillian, an eyewitness growing up, truly understands what I went through. She couldn't. There was no bridge between what Jillian saw our mother say and do and what I felt at the core. That's where the damage was, at the core. That's where the Treva-that-should-have-been was upended. No pep rally will convince me that everything is okay. See Mother in a different light? Jillian is crazy to even suggest this could be a good thing. I am not going.

I shift my gaze from the water to Jillian to tell her, but a realization flips my stomach. Jillian told Mother that I don't have a job. I know she did. And Mother thinks I've failed, that I'm miserable, and wants to see for herself and gloat. If I don't go, she will say it was worse than she thought, that I couldn't bear to show my face. I rock my leg as a hint of spunk returns. No way will I give her the satisfaction.

"We'll be there," I say in monotone.

Jillian flings an arm around me and squeezes. "Really?"

"Mm-hm."

She stands and outstretches her hand to pull me up. "I'm glad, Treva. I think you made the right decision. Now let me see those girls and this beautiful house you put together."

My body rises warily, not trusting what my mind has come up with.